

Professional Development for Balanced Literacy Instruction

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Education in the United States has had many purposes, from preparing students for work in factories of the industrial revolution to ensuring access to greater economic success through post-secondary options. Teachers have the responsibility of addressing societal inequities by providing students from all backgrounds with the type of excellent instruction that closes achievement gaps created through economic disparities. By ensuring students read on grade level by the end of third grade, teachers are providing the foundation for success in school through high school graduation and beyond (Annie E. Casey, 2010). A large piece of this puzzle is providing effective literacy instruction, for which pre-service teachers are not fully prepared.

Literacy as an Equity Issue

Ensuring that students are able to read and comprehend grade level material is one of the greatest responsibilities schools have, especially at the elementary level. Students who do not read on grade level by the end of third grade are more likely to drop out of high school (Annie E. Casey, 2010). There is a significant shift between the end of third grade and the beginning of fourth grade, where students shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn;” individuals who are not able to navigate this transition are more likely to struggle with the academic demands of school in later years (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). Additionally individuals without a high school diploma are “more likely to be incarcerated than those with higher levels of education” (Lesnick et al. 2010, p. 5). These factors make literacy instruction not only an educational issue, but also an equity issue with far reaching implications for society. Politicians at all levels have attempted to address this issue through laws such as Goals 2000 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. These laws have been enacted with the best of intentions: ensuring students can read and write on grade level so every child has the opportunity for success in school and post-secondary possibilities; ensuring each

individual can achieve a productive life, thereby reducing incarceration rates across the country. The importance of effective literacy instruction cannot be underestimated.

Balanced Literacy Instruction

Literacy instruction has been a hotly debated topic for many years, resulting in what some refer to as the “reading wars,” fought over whether emphasis should be on whole language or phonics or other reading skills instruction which builds comprehension (Pearson & Pearson, 2004). In today’s schools a balanced approach is found most often, with many aspects of a literacy diet being offered to students. The goal of balanced literacy is to provide students with a structured variety of literacy experiences to ensure students read and comprehend grade level content. The National Reading Panel advocated for the use of scientifically based literacy instruction in five areas: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Armbruster, Lehr & Osborn, 2001). To meet these instructional goals, many schools have turned to a balanced literacy model employing instruction through word study, guided reading, shared and interactive reading and writing.

Balanced literacy is not a simple model or a program with scripted lessons, rather it is a structure within which teachers offer research-based instruction. One of the components of balanced literacy is guided reading: a method of small group reading instruction in which teachers provide students with strategy instruction to assist them in learning “how to use independent reading strategies successfully” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 2). Students engage with new text selected at a level presenting some challenge, but that the students can understand with a “minimum of support” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 2). Guided reading lessons involve small groups of 6 or fewer students on approximately the same reading level; the teacher typically introduces a new book by pointing out text features including pictures and other important

words or phrases; students then read the entire text either silently or very quietly. During this time the teacher may interact briefly with students supporting their understanding through strategy use and finally will conclude the lesson by discussing the book and addressing any “teaching points” that may have been identified during observation of student reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). A final important component of guided reading is formative assessment called running records, which allow the teacher to observe students’ independent reading and make decisions about further instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Becoming adept at literacy instruction through guided reading is no simple task, and this is only a single part of the balanced model which teachers must master.

In order for teachers to become experts in literacy instruction through balanced literacy, it is necessary to provide quality professional development. Elementary teachers are asked to become experts in teaching reading, math, science and social studies. This can be a tremendous burden, which necessarily requires additional training, coaching and mentoring throughout a teacher’s career. In a study conducted by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, only 25 percent of pre-service teachers reported a strong focus in their program on the five components of literacy instruction; additionally these teachers indicated that the greater exposure to instruction of the components of literacy instruction came through field work (Salinger et al., 2010, p. xiii). Many teachers do not enter the classroom with the skills necessary to successfully teach literacy through a balanced model (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Cunningham & Neuman, 2009). Developing the knowledge and skills of in-service teachers through professional development is necessary to build the capacity to offer effective literacy instruction, closing the gap between teacher preparation programs and the knowledge and abilities required to instruct today’s students (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Guskey, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Effective Professional Development

Professional development is not new to educators; they have been “developed” for many years both successfully and unsuccessfully. It is not accidental that professional development activities are sometimes referred to as “spray, pray and go away.” In other words, many teachers are exposed to information about a new teaching practice, the administrators pray it will take hold, and the teachers know it will eventually go away. However if teacher practices and beliefs are ever going to be changed, effective learning experiences are necessary. While there have been a number of studies on the necessary components of effective professional development, for a variety of reasons a simple panacea leading to improved instructional practices and student outcomes has not been identified (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). As educational leaders seek to provide effective professional development in balanced literacy instruction, it is critical that the programs developed align with the practices that have been identified as effective in changing classroom practice and improving student achievement.

There are several reasons why no one set of quality characteristics can be developed as a defining road map for quality professional development. The first issue is related to the definition of “effective” professional development (Guskey, 2003). How is effective measured? Is it through self-reported measures of teachers’ acceptance of the experience, through changes in practice, or through student achievement results (Guskey, 2003)? Second, context is critical in defining effective professional development (Guskey, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Each school’s context is distinctive and the professional development deployed must be equally unique to fit the needs of teachers and students (Guskey, 2003). A final critical factor is the quality of the training provided for the teachers. Almost every characteristic used to define effective professional development can be qualified with a “but” statement (Guskey, 2003). For example an appropriate amount of time for training is necessary, but not if the activities are poor in nature; more time spent engaged in poor quality activities will not improve teacher practice or student outcomes.

While the list of quality characteristics of professional development cannot be simplistically defined, there are elements, when implemented in a quality manner, that have been shown to improve student achievement and teacher practice (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Time

Professional development activities must be of “appropriate duration,” but how the time is used is critical to improving student outcomes (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000, p. 30). Kennedy (1998) found that while time spent in professional development went from five to over 100 hours, teachers who spent 30 or more hours had the most positive results. If the activities in which teachers are participating are poorly planned or are poor in quality, additional time spent engaging in bad experiences will not improve student achievement. However the much maligned traditional workshops have been found effective in some studies, if the focus is on “research-based instructional practices,” involve “active-learning experiences for participants,” and provide “teachers with opportunities to adapt the practice to their unique classroom situations” (Guskey & Yoon, 2009, p. 496). It appears that the quality of time spent is equal to and even more important to the quantity of time engaged with professional learning.

Active Learning

Birman, Desimone, Porter and Garet (2000) emphasize the importance of active learning for teachers, where teachers have the opportunity to “observe and be observed teaching; to plan classroom implementation...to review student work; and to present lead and write” (p. 31). Including active learning for teachers as part of a plan for professional development allows for the inclusion of other practices supported by research to include: follow-up experiences, job embeddedness, and even action research (Bevins, Jordan, & Perry, 2011; Guskey, 2009). Active learning experiences have the potential to assist teachers in: addressing implementation issues that may arise when making complex changes to instruction; allowing them to work through issues unique to particular contexts; and addressing the need for professional

development to be ongoing and “procedurally embedded” (Guskey, 1997, p. 6). Providing job embedded active learning in literacy instruction can take many forms, but could easily be offered in the form of observation and coaching by a literacy coach or reading specialist, making this a potentially very important component of literacy professional development.

Content

Stronge (2010) emphasizes the importance of teacher content and pedagogical knowledge on student achievement through extensive studies of available research; the greater teacher content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, the greater student achievement is. There is also an emphasis on the importance of professional development addressing both content knowledge and teacher pedagogy (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Teacher knowledge and skills increased when the trainings they attended were related to a single content area and teaching strategies related to that area, rather than when engaged in learning about “general teaching methods, such as lesson planning or grouping methods” (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000, p. 30). In fact, in a study of thirteen lists of qualities of effective professional development, the “most frequently mentioned characteristic...is enhancement of teachers’ content and pedagogic knowledge” (Guskey, 2003, p. 9). In light of this, any professional development activities should seek to build teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge.

Collective Participation

Effective implementation of research-based instructional strategies necessarily requires the participation of all the instructional personnel in a building. This component of training allows for engaging in more active learning opportunities, supporting the procedural nature of job embedded professional development (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Guskey, 1997). Teachers working together in the same building are better able to discuss challenges that arise related to their particular context, and to discuss and identify practices that work well in a particular implementation, building a strong “learning

community” (Birman, Desimone, Porter & Garet, 2000). However, there is also the potential for collaborating professionals to work together to create barriers to implementation and to rely instead on prior practices identified as “good” in the building, rather than working through the difficulties associated with implementing complex, research-based instructional strategies (Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Collaboration should be used as a part of effective professional development, but may be more effective if monitored and channeled by individuals who are able to reduce potential negativity and barriers and focus teachers on effective collaboration.

Coherence

A final important element for any professional development is alignment with district, state and national standards, as well as a connection to a greater vision (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Guskey, 1997). Professional development activities should be part of a greater plan, where connections to school, district and larger goals are clear; this prevents the feeling that professional development is a disjointed experience not related to actual classroom instruction (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000). Research also indicates that when professional development is a “coherent part of a wider set of opportunities for teacher learning and development,” there is an increase in teacher learning and improvement in classroom practice (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000, p. 31). When a larger change is broken down into smaller pieces and tied to a larger vision, teachers are better able to implement the changes as intended without developing a “coping strategy that distorts the change” (Guskey, 1997, p. 6). Ensuring that all professional development experiences are aligned with standards, goals and a common vision supports teachers’ efforts, improving the ultimate outcome: change in practice and increased student achievement.

Summary

While there are a variety of types of learning in which teachers participate some elements are better than others at fostering instructional change in the classroom and improved student outcomes. A multi-faceted approach aligned with standards,

goals and a great vision is critical for success. Beginning with up front time spent building teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge is a critical starting point. Continuing with well-planned active learning experiences throughout the year is also critical for teachers to change their practice. These active learning experiences could include the use of coaches who observe and provide formative feedback on teaching and time for collaboration with peers in developing lessons and problem-solving implementation difficulties, both of which would help bridge the divide between theoretical knowledge and practice in the classroom.

Literacy Professional Development

The federal government entered the fray of literacy instruction with the establishment of Reading First and Early Reading First initiatives, both established as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Cunningham & Neuman, 2009). These two programs tied funding to extensive professional development in literacy instruction for schools across the country. School systems receiving grant money from these programs agreed to implement scientifically-based reading programs in kindergarten through third grade, including a formative diagnostic assessment component and extensive professional development targeted at classroom instruction (United States Department of Education [USED], 2014). The training provided through the grants was meant to increase teachers’ knowledge of literacy instruction and to make use of “coaches, mentors, peers and outside experts” who would provide feedback to teachers implementing new literacy concepts in the classroom (USED, 2002, p. 7). While there has not been extensive research into the impact of teachers having increased content knowledge on student achievement in reading, there are indications that there are positive impacts on student learning (Stronge, 2010; Cunningham & Neuman, 2009). However pedagogical knowledge is more stable over time and has been shown to have an impact on student achievement as well (Strong, 2010; Cunningham & Neuman, 2009). The available research supports a combined approach to professional development: building content and pedagogical knowledge of literacy instruction.

Literacy Coaches

In recent years there has been greater use of practice-based professional development through coaches, especially in the area of literacy instruction (Carlisle, Cortina, & Katz, 2011; Cunningham & Neuman, 2009; Stephens, Morgan, DeFord, Donnelly, Hamel, Keith, Brink, Johnson, Seaman, Young, Gallant, Hao, & Leigh, 2011; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Literacy coaches can provide a critical link between the theory presented in workshops or college level content classes and the realities of implementing this knowledge into classroom practice (Cunningham & Neuman, 2009). Coaches generally work with teachers in the classroom, providing model lessons, observations of teacher practice, assistance in planning for instruction and effective use of student level data. They can also assist with fostering teacher collaboration and increasing knowledge of research-based teaching practices through the provision of study groups, although the degree to which coaches are able to facilitate collaboration is an area for further research (Carlisle, Cortina, & Katz, 2011; Stephens et al., 2011; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010).

There have been several studies on the impact of literacy coaches on teacher practice. Two of these involved different groups of researchers examining data from the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI), which made extensive use of literacy coaches across the state (Stephens et al., 2011; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). These studies supported the impact of coaches on teachers in a variety of positive ways including: fostering a greater sense of collegiality, increasing knowledge of students through improved data collection, increasing teacher exposure to research-based strategies, augmenting teachers' willingness to take instructional risks and try new things, and engendering a desire in teachers to read and attempt to implement research-based literacy instructional practices (Carlisle, Cortina, & Katz, 2011; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). One of the most beneficial components to this professional development model, as reported by teachers, was the time teachers were able to spend talking with each other and the coach and the empowerment to

try new instructional strategies in their classrooms (Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010).

The coaches themselves were also offered support in their roles to include: "university faculty..., regional literacy coaches, and state department liaisons" (Stephens et al., 2010, p. 218). They also engaged in extensive course work, nine hours per year, in research-based literacy instruction with the elements of balanced literacy; however training in being a coach was not formally provided (Stephens et al., 2010). A principal was required to be a part of the study group in which teachers participated, and throughout the program the coaches did not act as teacher evaluators, but rather as a supporter and facilitator of effective literacy instruction (Stephens et al., 2010; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Data gathered from both SCRI studies show positive impact on both classroom teachers' and coaches' perceptions of their reading instruction; additionally consistency rubrics completed on teacher reading instruction showed an increase in the number and frequency of research-based literacy strategies (Stephens et al., 2011).

The use of literacy coaches as part of a comprehensive professional development program can support changes to literacy instruction in the classroom. Hattie (2009) found that formative feedback to teachers about their instruction helps improve student achievement, with an effect size of .9. Coaches are able to offer teachers exactly this type of non-evaluative feedback on their instruction, as well as facilitating improved knowledge of research-based instruction through structured study groups, in other words providing active learning through collaboration. If coaches are part of well-planned professional development, are supported in their endeavors by others, and are used to provide feedback on literacy instruction, the dividends in the classroom could be great.

Conclusion

Literacy instruction is both an art and a science. Teacher preparation programs offer information to preservice teachers, but it takes time and a structured professional development program to translate the theory learned to be translated into practice in the classroom. Districts must take on the responsibility of planning comprehensive

professional development, aligning instructional practices with standards, providing teachers with the opportunity to attempt research-based instruction and receive feedback on their implementation from knowledgeable sources. The trainings must be of sufficient duration and have an embedded follow up component to support teachers in their practice. With these elements in place, teachers have the opportunity to hone their craft and improve student outcomes in literacy. Schools and society in general will reap the benefits of students reading on grade level; it is critical for teachers to provide students have the most effective instruction in literacy possible, and it is the school districts' responsibility to provide the necessary learning experiences for teachers to achieve this goal.

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